



President of the Swiss Confederation Arnold Koller (right) welcomes Lothar de Maizière, Prime Minister of the GDR.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

The First should be the Last

For decades, the communist regime in East Germany made great efforts to establish closer relations with Switzerland. Three weeks after a GDR prime minister visited Bern for the first time, the East German state ceased to exist.



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The press was assembled in *Beatrice von Wattenwyl-Haus*; the distinguished guest was greeted by a flurry of camera flashes. In the foyer of the patrician mansion in the heart of Bern's historic centre which the Federal Council used for official receptions, swarms of cameras captured the handshake between the Prime Minister of the German Democratic Republic (DDR) and the Foreign Minister of the Swiss Confederation.

Two other Federal Councillors and the President of the Swiss Confederation were also on hand to welcome the visitor from Berlin-Pankow. After the working talks in the Federal city, the GDR's head of government met with the leading figures in finance and economics at Zurich's Kongresshaus in the afternoon, to explore new investment options in East Germany. The photograph from 10 September 1990 captured the historic moment for which the top echelons of the GDR regime had so ardently longed for decades. One might suppose...



GDR Prime Minister Lothar de Maizière (left) and Swiss Foreign Minister René Felber in Bern in 1990.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

The GDR had been a pariah in world politics since its formation in 1949. Because of the Federal Republic of Germany's (FRG) *Hallstein Doctrine* – under which the West German government asserted its claim to sole representation for Germany, and qualified any establishment of diplomatic relations with the GDR as an “*unfriendly act*” – for a long time the Communist Party regime had close contacts only with the Eastern bloc countries. Out of respect for Bonn's sensitivity, the West and many non-aligned states avoided official political, economic or cultural contacts with East Germany, let alone formally recognising the GDR.

Of course this also applied for neutral Switzerland, which was wary of displeasing its powerful neighbour and most important trading partner with any missteps towards the unloved East German communists. The GDR authorities, for their part, became all the more insistent in their efforts “*time and again, by all available means, to move closer to a de facto recognition of their state by Switzerland*”, as the *Federal Political Department* (from 1979, the FDFA) claimed in the 1960s (dodis.ch/31183): “*The GDR has an economic, but in particular an eminently political interest in establishing official relations with Switzerland.*” (dodis.ch/32468)



The GDR, here East Berlin in 1966, was quite isolated politically for a long time. It only had contact with other Eastern bloc nations.
[Wikimedia](#)

When a certain rapprochement between the two German states became apparent at the beginning of the 1970s, the Federal Council agreed in July 1972, after protracted negotiations, to establish reciprocal trade missions in Zurich and East Berlin. With this “*minimal arrangement*” Bern hoped also to do better in addressing the needs of the approximately 3,000 Swiss citizens living in the GDR, and to negotiate compensation for the Swiss assets expropriated in the course of communisation (dodis.ch/34362).

When relations between the two German states were normalised shortly afterwards with the inception of the Basic Treaty, Switzerland was among the first Western countries to recognise the GDR, on 20 December 1972 – just one day before the signing of the German-German agreement (dodis.ch/34372). The speedy gesture remained an isolated episode. Switzerland was the last Western European industrial nation to conclude a trade and economic agreement with the GDR, finally doing so in 1975 (dodis.ch/49969).

Political relations with the regime in Pankow also developed sluggishly. As a result, the leadership of the workers' and peasants' state was all the more delighted by an invitation extended to its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Oskar Fischer (dodis.ch/49329). Fischer's first visit to Bern finally took place in November 1980 (dodis.ch/60489); he visited again in April 1989 for talks with the head of the FDFA, Federal Councillor René Felber. Relations remained strained for a long time because of the exit applications for binational marriages and family reunifications held by the GDR authorities. The compensation negotiations in respect of nationalised Swiss property, which had begun back in 1973, had not been concluded by 1990.



Lothar de Maizière in Bern on 10 September 1990.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

Against this backdrop, the visit of GDR head of government Lothar de Maizière on 10 September 1990 could have been a crowning triumph for the *Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED)*. At that juncture, the SED was no longer in power alone. With the sudden fall of the Berlin Wall on the night of 9 November 1989, the old regime had been swept away. As elsewhere in the Eastern bloc, a peaceful revolution heralded the transition to democracy. As the leading candidate of the *Christian Democratic Union (CDU)* party, de Maizière was sworn in as head of government by the People's Chamber (*Volkskammer*) on 12 April 1990, following the first free parliamentary elections. The first democratically elected, and at the same time the last Prime Minister of the GDR, governed for 199 days. The declared goal of his government was the dissolution of the GDR and unification with the FRG. “*Please always keep in mind*”, de Maizière told his cabinet in its first session, “*our main purpose, which the voters have given us, is to abolish ourselves.*”

He visited Switzerland 23 days before completing his work.



Video of the fall of the Wall, from 1989.
[YouTube](#)

The talks between Lothar de Maizières and Federal Councillor René Felber were clearly coloured by the turmoil in Eastern Europe. “*Pan-European history has been rediscovered today*”, said de Maizière, “*Prague, Budapest and Berlin have 'come back'*”. He saw the imminent unification of the German states “*as a chance for Germans to finally clear out the debris of a bad system*”. However, as he acknowledged in an interview, the GDR was lying in ruins “*not only in economic and political terms... but also culturally and mentally*”. The “*spiritual distortions*” after four decades of SED rule over East Germany were enormous, the “*technological gap is substantial*”. For his part, Felber highlighted the importance of regional cooperation between the cantons and the five new federal states in eastern Germany – in future, intergovernmental relations would operate via Bonn. (dodis.ch/55552)

If an outgoing US president is referred to as a ‘*lame duck*’ in his final days in office, then three weeks before the dissolution of the GDR Prime Minister de Maizière was probably the lamest duck of all. His reception in Bern could be no more than a show of sympathy for the population of the GDR and their first democratically elected government. “*We are all aware that, while the historically unparalleled process of a nation voluntarily being absorbed into its neighbour does bring with it the long-awaited freedom without paternalism from above in every sphere of life, the people of the GDR have a high economic price to pay for it*”, President of the Swiss Confederation Arnold Koller emphasised in his toast to the guest at the formal luncheon. “*I wish you and your fellow citizens strength and patience for the difficult path that still lies ahead of you, and the certainty that it will be worth it in the end.*” (dodis.ch/56550)

Joint research

This text is the product of a collaboration between the Swiss National Museum (SNM) and the Forschungsstelle Diplomatische Dokumente der Schweiz (Dodis), the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland research centre. The SNM is researching images relating to Switzerland's foreign policy in the archives of the agency Actualités Suisses Lausanne (ASL), and Dodis puts these photographs in context using the official source material. The files on the year 1990 were published on the internet database Dodis in January 2021. The documents cited in the text are available online: dodis.ch/C2111.